

The Clipper Visits... Bob Whittier

By MARTHA HIMES

Bob Whittier, an award-winning aviation and boating writer and former airplane mechanic, began working with planes as a teen in the 1930s and hasn't stopped yet.

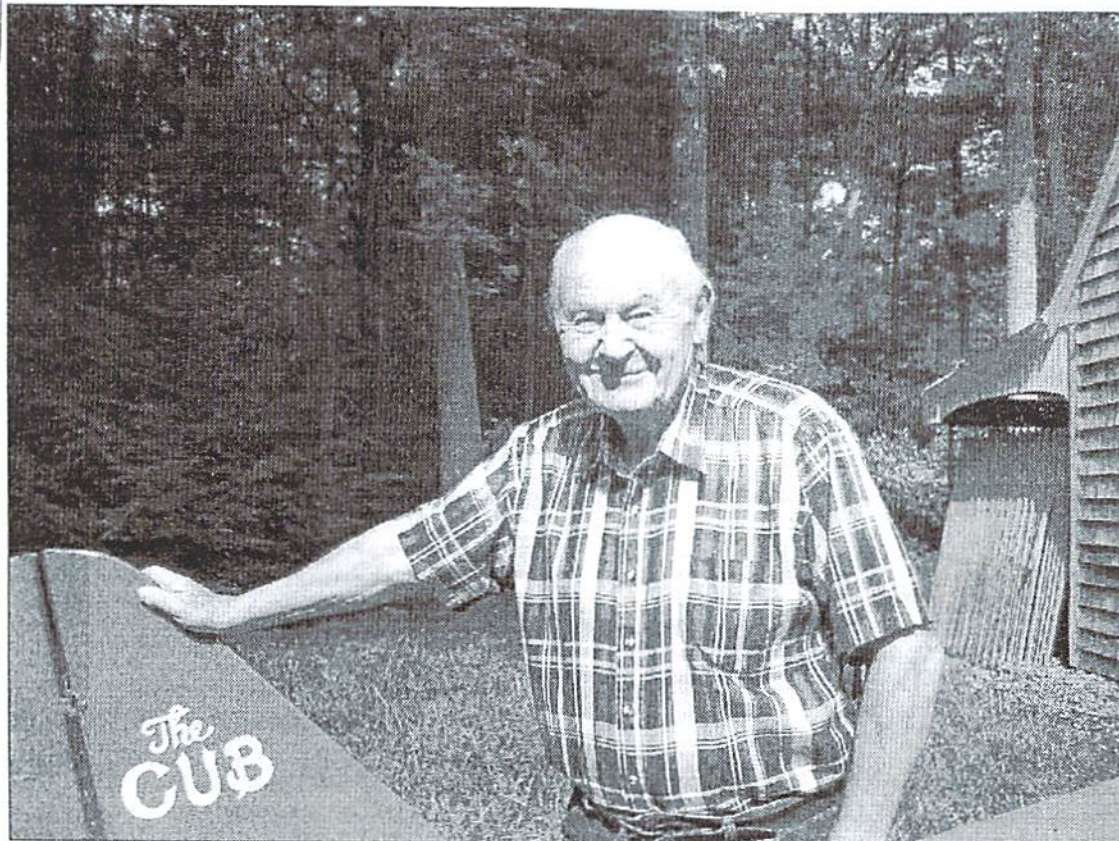
"I started hanging around airports 70 years ago. I can pass along information to younger readers that they may not get anywhere else. I may be the only person in the world who can write the articles I write," he said.

Whittier, 81, lost his hearing at the age of seven from an infection. "There's a saying 'blindness cuts you off from things, deafness cuts you off from people,'" he said. Although Whittier learned to lip-read as a child at Boston's Horace Mann School for the Deaf, throughout his life he has found that saying to be true. However, the isolation he felt growing up became the basis for his successful career later.

As a Boy Scout at Plymouth's Camp Squanto, his deafness discouraged him from participating in team sports. Instead, he became a talented boater, focusing on canoeing and rowing. *To this day*, he writes for boating magazines and is restoring a canoe he found at the transfer station.

Since he felt cut off from other children, he became an avid reader. Knowing he loved to read, a family friend brought him a stack of discarded aviation magazines, which triggered Whittier's life-long love of aviation.

His interest piqued by the magazines, he began assembling model airplanes. Looking back now, Whittier realizes that "putting them together taught patience, the importance of using sharp tools and the importance of using the right tools." His basement office is decorated with delicate paper and balsa wood model airplanes.



THE WRITE STUFF: Bob Whittier has been contributing articles to aviation magazines for over 60 years. Here he is with the Piper Cub he purchased and repaired.

Photo by Martha Himes

From model airplanes he moved on to real airplanes. As a pre-teen, he began riding his bike to all the local airports dotting the South Shore, becoming an "airport kid." He learned to roll planes in and out of the hangars, start planes and wash them.

Spending so much time around the airports taught him the intricacies of 1930s aircraft, which is the basis of his writing career today.

After graduating from Thayer Academy in Braintree, Whittier went to aviation school in Illinois, intending to study aeronautical engineering. However, once he began classes, he realized that his chosen course of study relied heavily on lectures, which he could not follow. He changed his major to mechanical engineering, which relied more on reading. He received his mechanic's license in 1942 and worked at various airports for the next seven to eight years.

He took flying lessons whenever an instructor was free, learning to fly Piper Cubs. Whittier achieved his pilot's license and eventually bought and fixed up his own Piper Cub.

In the 1940s, Whittier began writing for aviation and boating magazines. One of the first articles of his nascent writing career was for *Hunting and Fishing* magazine. It described the post-war Cape Cod sport fishing technique of flying a light aircraft low over the coast to locate schools of striped bass. After a school was sighted, the pilot would land on the beach and he and his passenger would fish.

Whittier's writing career was such a success that he stopped working as a mechanic.

He has written regularly for the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) member-

ship magazine *Experimenter* for 12 years. The former mechanic explained that during World War II, thousands of men learned to build and maintain aircraft. After the war ended, these former aircraft mechanics, designers and aviators turned their wartime experience into a hobby, building airplanes in their back yards. A dozen such men formed the EAA in Milwaukee in the early 1950s. Now, the organization's worldwide membership numbers around 170,000.

Most of the planes EAA members build are constructed from kits, with quality parts and thorough directions, often with help from EAA member technical advisors. The FAA must inspect homemade planes before they are flown. Once a plane passes that rigorous inspection, it cannot be flown freely until it successfully completes 25 to 40 hours in a test pattern over an

unpopulated area. As a result, Whittier said, such home-grown planes have a very good safety record.

In addition to writing about planes, he still writes in boating magazines, and has published several books.

"Boats and planes have much in common. They must both be in good condition, you must know what you're doing, they are both supported by a fluid, and they are both affected by bad weather....Boaters make good aviators and aviators make good sailors," Whittier said.

He and his wife, Helen, have lived in Duxbury for many years. They have three children, now scattered across the country from Kingston to the West Coast.

Whittier worries that children today are not learning the hands-on skills that he learned building model airplanes. He told a story about delivering wood boards to the Boy Scout

camp and asking the boys to help him pull out the old nails, but only a handful of the scouts knew how to use the claw end of a hammer.

"One reason employers today complain that 'it's hard to find good help today!' is because today's kids don't get the all-around practical experiences that farm kids used to as a matter of their everyday lives," Whittier wrote in a note.

In July, the prolific writer traveled to the EAA annual conference in Oshkosh, WI, to receive the "Bax Seat Trophy," an award presented by *Flying* magazine to an EAA member who has notably contributed to aircraft literature.

The Bax Seat Trophy will have to share wall space in Whittier's home with the more than a dozen other aircraft and boating awards he has won throughout his writing career.